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ISIS Is a Disgrace to True Fundamentalism

By Slavoj Zizek September 3, 2014 2:45 pm

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

It has become a commonplace in recent months to observe that the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, is the latest chapter in the long story of the anticolonial awakening — the arbitrary borders drawn after World War I by the great powers being redrawn — and simultaneously a chapter in the struggle against the way global capital undermines the power of nation states. But what causes such fear and consternation is another feature of the ISIS regime: The public statements of the ISIS authorities make it clear that the principal task of state power is not the regulation of the welfare of the state's population (health, the fight against hunger) — what really matters is religious life and the concern that all public life obey religious laws. This is why ISIS remains more or less indifferent toward humanitarian catastrophes within its domain — its motto is roughly “take care of religion and welfare will take care of itself.” Therein resides the gap that separates the notion of power practiced by ISIS from the modern Western notion of what Michel Foucault called “biopower,” which regulates life in order to guarantee general welfare: the ISIS caliphate totally rejects the notion of biopower.

Does this make ISIS premodern? Instead of seeing in ISIS a case of extreme resistance to modernization, one should rather conceive of it as a case of perverted modernization and locate it into the series of conservative modernizations which began with the Meiji restoration in 19th-century Japan

(rapid industrial modernization assumed the ideological form of “restoration,” or the return to the full authority of the emperor).

The well-known photo of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS leader, with an exquisite Swiss watch on his arm, is here emblematic: ISIS is well organized in web propaganda as well as financial dealings, although these ultra-modern practices are used to propagate and enforce an ideologico-political vision that is not so much conservative as a desperate move to fix clear hierarchic delimitations. However, we should not forget that even this image of a strictly disciplined and regulated fundamentalist organization is not without its ambiguities: is religious oppression not (more than) supplemented by the way local ISIS military units seem to function? While the official ISIS ideology rails against Western permissiveness, the daily practice of the ISIS gangs includes full-scale grotesque orgies, including robberies, gang rapes, torture and murder of infidels.

Upon a closer look, the apparent heroic readiness of ISIS to risk everything also appears more ambiguous. Long ago Friedrich Nietzsche perceived how Western civilization was moving in the direction of the Last Man, an apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment. Unable to dream, tired of life, he takes no risks, seeking only comfort and security: “A little poison now and then: that makes for pleasant dreams. And much poison at the end, for a pleasant death. They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night, but they have a regard for health. ‘We have discovered happiness,’ say the Last Men, and they blink.”

It may appear that the split between the permissive First World and the fundamentalist reaction to it runs more and more along the lines of the opposition between leading a long satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth and dedicating one’s life to some transcendent cause. Is this antagonism not the one between what Nietzsche called “passive” and “active” nihilism? We in the West are the Nietzschean Last Men, immersed in stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the struggle up to their self-destruction. William Butler Yeats’ “Second Coming” seems perfectly to render our present predicament: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” This is an excellent description of the current split between anemic liberals and impassioned fundamentalists. “The best” are no

longer able fully to engage, while “the worst” engage in racist, religious, sexist fanaticism.

But are the terrorist fundamentalists really fundamentalists in the authentic sense of the term? Do they really believe? What they lack is a feature that is easy to discern in all authentic fundamentalists, from Tibetan Buddhists to the Amish in the United States — the absence of resentment and envy, the deep indifference towards the nonbelievers’ way of life. If today’s so-called fundamentalists really believe they have found their way to Truth, why should they feel threatened by nonbelievers. Why should they envy them? When a Buddhist encounters a Western hedonist, he hardly condemns. He just benevolently notes that the hedonist’s search for happiness is self-defeating. In contrast to true fundamentalists, the terrorist pseudo-fundamentalists are deeply bothered, intrigued and fascinated by the sinful life of the nonbelievers. One can feel that, in fighting the sinful other, they are fighting their own temptation. This is why the so-called fundamentalists of ISIS are a disgrace to true fundamentalism.

It is here that Yeats’ diagnosis falls short of the present predicament: The passionate intensity of a mob bears witness to a lack of true conviction. Deep in themselves, terrorist fundamentalists also lack true conviction — their violent outbursts are a proof of it. How fragile the belief of a Muslim must be if he feels threatened by a stupid caricature in a low-circulation Danish newspaper. The fundamentalist Islamic terror is not grounded in the terrorists’ conviction of their superiority and in their desire to safeguard their cultural-religious identity from the onslaught of global consumerist civilization.

The problem with terrorist fundamentalists is not that we consider them inferior to us, but, rather, that they themselves secretly consider themselves inferior. This is why our condescending, politically correct assurances that we feel no superiority toward them only makes them more furious and feeds their resentment. The problem is not cultural difference (their effort to preserve their identity), but the opposite fact that they already like us, that, secretly, they have already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them. Paradoxically, what the fundamentalists of ISIS and those like them really lack is precisely a dose of that true conviction of one’s own superiority.

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books, including the forthcoming "Absolute Recoil."

Editors' Note: September 5, 2014

After this essay was published, a reader pointed out that several sections had originally appeared, in identical or substantially similar form, in Slavoj Zizek's 2008 book, "Violence: Six Sideways Reflections." The New York Times does not ordinarily reprint material that has been previously published; Op-Ed contributors are asked to affirm that their work is original, and exclusive to The Times. Had The Times known that portions of the essay were copied from an earlier work, it would not have accepted the essay for publication.

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